

Book review on “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism : The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power”

Author: Shoshana Zuboff, a Harvard professor ISBN: 978-1-61039-569-4, Published: 2019, Pages: 691

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Introduction

The purpose of this book review is to provide a critical analysis of “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism” by Shoshana Zuboff. The book aims to raise awareness about the growing power and influence of tech companies, which the author refers to as “surveillance capitalists”, and the implications this has for individual privacy, autonomy, and democracy. Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism represents a new form of capitalism, one that seeks to extract and monetize personal data for profit. The book is an eye-opener about the implications of surveillance capitalism in our society, and encourages individuals, policymakers, and tech companies to take action to protect individual rights and values in the digital age.

Main summary

Zuboff, in her book, provides a detailed exploration of the emergence and impact of surveillance capitalism which uses human experience as raw material to generate profit. The book is divided into four parts, each providing unique insights into the surveillance capitalism phenomenon. In the first part, Zuboff delves into the foundation of surveillance capitalism, explaining how companies like Google have disregarded users’ privacy boundaries and extracted information from users’ data for their own profit, which is later used to influence the user’s behavior. She provides examples of how the absence of regulations has led to the flourishing of these invasive methods, leading to an increase in surveillance capitalism.

In the second part of the book, Zuboff illustrates how surveillance capitalism has moved from the virtual world to the real world. She points out how Google street cars are similar to web crawlers to crawl through our real world to start monitoring us and gathering further information about us in the real world. The third part of the book delves into the social and political implications of surveillance capitalism. She draws a harsh comparison between surveillance capitalism and totalitarianism. She explains that while totalitarianism relies on violence and fear to maintain power, surveillance capitalism uses behavior modification and data collection to achieve the same end. Finally, in the fourth part of the book, Zuboff offers a critique of surveillance capitalism and explores possible ways to resist its power. She emphasizes the importance of individuals taking control of their personal data and the need for laws to regulate data manipulation.

There are several arguments in her book. One of the key arguments is Behavior Manipulation. “Pokemon Go” is a good example of how companies can use data analysis and machine learning to manipulate human behavior. By analyzing data on player behavior, the creators were able to make increasingly accurate predictions about how players would react to different situations and encourage players to keep playing and spending money on the game. Another consequence of Surveillance Capitalism is the creation of new markets from predictive knowledge. By analyzing vast amounts of data, companies can make increasingly accurate predictions about human behavior and preferences and create new products or services. Even more concerning are the “dark patterns” that companies use to obtain even more data from individuals. By burying important information

in lengthy terms and conditions or using other deceptive techniques, companies are able to collect data from individuals who may not fully understand or consent to this data collection.

One of the main strengths of this book is Zuboff's thorough research and detailed analysis. She also examines the social, political, and economic implications of this phenomenon, including the erosion of privacy, the threat to democracy, and the impact on human psychology and behavior. While Zuboff's analysis is impressive, her argument is not without its flaws. For example, she tends to present a negative view of surveillance capitalism, framing it as an existential threat to society. It is important to also consider its potential benefits, for example without Google's customized engine we would be going to the library to get access to a book.

Overall, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" provides a thought-provoking and informative analysis of the rise of surveillance capitalism and its impact on society. Zuboff's writing is easily understandable, and she provides numerous examples to support her arguments, making it relevant and accurate to the current digital era. While the book has limitations, it is a must-read for anyone interested in the future of our digital society.

Conclusion

The colloquium on life engineering helped discuss the models that need to be practiced to bring about an ethical and sustainable solution. It is tragic to lose the rights that have taken centuries to achieve, and we must not allow this to go unnoticed. Instead of allowing technology to dictate our values and behavior, adopting an ethical mindset encourages us to prioritize the things that matter most to us. This might involve digital minimization, and finding an alternative plan, which needs to consider the bottleneck of energy consumption that digital computation requires and find an analog computation method. The solution will require a collective effort from both individuals and the larger society. This involves raising awareness about the harms of current digital technologies and pushing for legislative reforms that protect individual privacy rights. By working together to demand change, we can build a more ethical and just future for all.